DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 255 057 FL 014 942

AUTHOR Regan, Maureen
TITLE Why FLES Fails: Lack of Funds or American Provincialism?
PUB DATE 85
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the International Conference on Second/Foreign Language Acquisition by Children (Oklahoma City, OK, March 29-30, 1985).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Curriculum Development; Elementary Education; *Financial Support; *FLES; Instructional Materials; *Language Attitudes; *Language Teachers; *Resource Allocation; Secondary Education; *Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; Transfer of Training

ABSTRACT

America's elementary schools are again ready for foreign language instruction. When commitment to such programs exists, funding can usually be found and creative use of existing materials and personnel resources can ease the budget. Provincialism is a greater obstacle. Foreign language programs can help to eradicate the anti-language attitude that keeps school administrators, neighbors, business people, and diplomats monolingual and narrows children's viewpoints. Administrative support, which can make or break a program, can be in the form of an administrator who believes in the language teachers but absents himself from the program, or who openly backs foreign language instruction and seeks staff and curricula to accomplish it. In either case, it is essential to program success to involve any and all individuals who support the program concept and provide any information that supports foreign language instruction. In addition, program staff must be well qualified, and many resources exist to accomplish this. Finally, the curriculum and materials supporting the program can and should be greatly improved, not limiting children's cultural background to the habits of everyday living but providing connections for new ideas, concepts, and philosophies. Language programs do not fail for lack of money but because of the prevailing notion that children cannot learn languages well and that langauge learning is not a serious task. (MSE)

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WHY FLES FAILS: LACK OF FUNDS OR AMERICAN PROVINCIALISM?

by Maureen Regan

Foreign Languages in the Elementary School have come of age...again. From Maine to California the word is out, FLES is in. No matter that second language instruction for the youngest American is neither new or innovative--the first program began in the 1800's in the Cincinnati Public Schools--the notion remains determinedly novel, frighteningly trendy and regrettably cyclic. If college language courses remain, FLES programs come and go, dependent on financial and professional whim or on which curricular bandwagon the school district happens to be riding. Beginners in language, it would seem, are destined to be old; the "age" of the learner apparently determines the "quality" of the academic experience. Yet when the nation's educators are periodically cajoled or frightened into reevaluating the means by which they reach those hearts and minds to which tomorrow's hopes are inalterably tied, the case for FLES is tried and wins.

America's schools are once again ready for early language instruction. Better informed and genuinely concerned, they are anxious not to repeat past mistakes. If they are indeed back to basics, they are also running scared. There is, quite simply, too much at stake to fail again. Embassies, once inviolate, have become the terrorist's playground. Developing nations have the cheek to want their own customs respected and their own language used. No longer unchallenged in the world market, the monolingual American business is losing out to its multilingual

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competition; "American technology," announces the *New York Times*, "is losing technological ground." In this age of instant information, we have come to realize that instant annihilation is only as far away as the nearest panic button. The experts' warnings plus concern for American peace, power and prosperity, have finally combined to give the public pause. No longer to be considered luxuries for an elitist few, understanding, communicating with and relating to our world neighbors have become mandates not to be ignored if we intend to survive yet another generation.

The experts have spoken. The youngest student is the ideal language candidate. Proficiency is not an overnight process; the road to fluency is long and hard. The *child* is in fact our most avid word collector. How many adults build 400 new items into their vocabularies in a six month period? We know the arguments; we may not know the answers. The issues are clear; the solutions are less so. Why are so many FLES programs initiated in the heyday of language renewal, now defunct? Why are not these programs, which research supports and the public wants (84% of those with children sixteen and under would encourage their children to take a foreign language. 74% believe knowing a foreign language would help Americans to have a better awareness and understanding of people from other nations) healthy enough to endure trends and cycles and budgetary crises?

The cause for *secondary* language learning has indeed been thoroughly documented . The cause of *early* foreign language

learning, however, even among language professionals remains an enigmatic, less than substantive, gray area haunted by past failures; the last curricular area to be funded and the first to have financial support withdrawn, it is perceived as educationally sound yet not academically rigorous. At best a perk for the affluent school district, FLES often eludes the efforts of language sensitive legislators and serious language scholars whose attention seems ever riveted on high schools and universities. We are dedicated to the belief that the only real language learner is the older language learner. And when in response to public pressure or academic conscience language programs for children are initiated, we fail our most natural learners by denying them access to academically challenging, culturally rich curricula supported by pedagogically sound, appropriately designed materials. Then programs fail and we name lack of funds and American provincialism the culprits. Well, funds are far from the main issue and American provincialism is a curable, if life threatening disease.

Good programs weather hard times. Master teachers are helped but not made by media packages or visual aids. And funds can be found where commitment endures. Potsdam College of Arts and Science, oldest unit of the university system of the State of New York has supported a children's language program on its campus for nearly 40 years. Set in rural, relatively isolated, sometimes welfare ridden Northern New York, the University has known its share of budget crisis. Located in small town America,

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in an area as prone as any other its size to small ideas, Potsdam College has maintained an active, viable FLES program since the mid-1940's. When the Children's Learning Center nearly closed in 1975, threatening to take the language program with it, the program's director sought help from the National Endowment for the Humanities to extend the Potsdam FLES experience through television. The Endowment did help; Potsdam language classes continued and others began in fourteen states across the nation. Money, then, can be found, and creative use of existing materials and personnel resources soothes the sting of a meager purse. If budget is our handiest excuse, it is not our most formidable enemy.

Provincialism is the far more dangerous adversary. Its protagonists are the products of an educational system that says that courses in language need not be part and parcel of the American school curriculum at every level. If colleges over the past decade dropped language requirements, they did not drop language courses. High schools of any academic reputation similarly may have de-emphasized second languages, but they did not remove them from the curriculum. Why then is language instruction basic to the curriculum only of the student whom research says is past his or her linguistic prime? More than giving the American student an honest shot at eventual fluency, more than influencing him/her to continue language study, more than laying a solid foundation on which later language learning can be built, FLES can bring about a change in the prevailing

anti-language attitude before it exists. It is this attitude that keeps the school administrator and our neighbors, the business person in the world market and the diplomat at the conference table monolingual.

If the speech patterns of the very young are malleable, so are their priorities, their tastes, their perceptions of the world about them. There exists in the early language classroom an unparalleled opportunity to raise the international conscience of a new generation of Americans. The young student represents the nearly blank page on which we can still write our history as we wish to read it. Language instruction can be the window through which the child sees the rest of the world. But as long as the learning of a new language remains an adjunct, after school, now and then or almost never activity, the change in attitude which could irreversibly alter America's language posture in a positive way, will be forever out of reach. When FLES is as routine a part of the elementary school day as reading and writing we reach all children. In high school and college language courses, we reach only a chosen few whose life course is nearly charted.

Knowing all this to be true is one thing. Making it all come true is another. I suggest three target areas which merit our undivided professional attention: administrative support, teacher training, and material and curriculum development.

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

In the final analysis, it is an administrative decision that closes down or puts in place an elementary language program. Even master teachers conducting model programs are at the mercy of administrative support. Too many American public school administrators, operate from an *English only* base. Monolingually trained and functional, they perceive the world through a monolingual lens with all the lack of insight, privileges and benefits pertaining thereto. But administrators do care about children and sincerely believe children's total development to be their responsibility. It is on this level, as conscientious caretakers of tomorrow's citizens, that we must appeal to them.

There are two kinds of administrative support. In one, the administrator believes totally in the teacher who will plan, organize and implement the language program. Yet lacking background in language acquisition or language learning, these principals absent themselves from the FLES process. Then when trends change and budgets shift, it is easier to disband programs about which they know relatively little and in which they have made marginal, if any, personal investment. Chances are these administrators have had minimum language training with an equally minimal rate of success. They are insecure about their own ability to speak a second language--a feeling unfortunately encouraged by those elitists who do. The second type of administrative support is found in those who openly back and

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believe in the value of early language learning on their own and seek staff and curricula which will confirm what they know to be true.

In either case, rule number one is to deliberately and personally involve those who may choose to make FLES a genuine and lasting component of the curriculum. Remember that administrators as Americans first, and public school officials second, are prey to the same myths and misconceptions as any other citizen. They believe that as a nation we are not only language deficient but linguistically unable. Not true. We are not less able; we are less willing. American children are not stupid, yet their peers in practically every other country in the world are given the opportunity to learn other languages easily and expertly. Every child is language gifted. Such misconceptions can and must be corrected.

The administrator should be approached as American to American and educator to educator, not as bilingual to monolingual. Convince with the heart and the mind with an emphasis on the mind. The American may care that we spend billions of dollars on weaponry to kill the Russians and less than it takes to repair three-quarters of a mile of interstate highway to get to know them. The American will care about the balance of payments deficit in the amount of 25-30 billion dollars going to those whose languages are different from our own. The American will care that, most area specialists in the Executive Branch (of the federal government) including the

intelligence services, do not, usually cannot read the materials of greatest concern to them in the original... The American will be interested in the fact that a 1975 survey revealed that among 1,261 U. S. based companies, there are 60,678 positions in which foreign language is necessary or preferable. The American will care that one out of every eight manufacturing jobs is dependent on exports--that one out of every three American acres is used to grow produce for export.

The educator will care that transfer from second language study contributes to improved performance in English vocabulary, that students of second language in the elementary schools out perform other students on measures of English vocabulary word knowledge, reading and comprehension. The educator will be interested in the association between foreign language proficiency and the level at which studies started, that those who start in elementary school do the best, or that students who have had a foreign language exposure in grade school are more likely to take a language in high school, or that the child who studies a language early may also listen more carefully, read more widely, judge more fairly, select different items from a menu, different books from a library, or elect a trip to a museum over one to the television set.

If foreign languages in the elementary school are your cause, know the facts. However well-intentioned, uninformed emotional support is useless. Read the experts. Know your opponents. Send frequent factual information regarding the

national language profile to those in your district who keep FLES alive. Build a "visual" professional library and use it. Locate model programs through ERIC, MLA, ACTFL, or your state language association and visit them with your supervisors and/or administrators. Teach with your door open literally and figuratively. Know as much about why you are teaching young students as what you are teaching.

THE FLES TEACHER

Teachers of FLES like the subject they teach have a serious image problem---sometimes, regrettably, deserved. No matter that the wide-eyed, six year old language learner in no way resembles his/her sleepy-eyed, glazed-over college counterpart. No matter that the course content closely resembles that of a beginning college course; when the student is eighteen, it's "Language 101"; when the student is eight it's fun and games. The secondary or college language teacher hopefully has a wealth of background in the content area. The FLES teacher may make an impressive presentation based on an impoverished second language background which may not withstand a long language learning sequence. It is a common belief that anyone can teach a child and sadly sometimes does. A bona fide language teacher must have bona fide credentials. A FLES teacher apparently can be anyone from your next door neighbor who "once studied" to the non-teacher native speaker. Neither is an ideal candidate. The best FLES teachers are rather, specialists who know children and are

trained to teach them, those who consider any language learning a serious academic endeavor. They are orally superior, pedagogically skilled, (methods do matter) with a diversified cultural background.

Where are these unusual professionals, and lacking those in sufficient number, how do we recycle our available personnel resources? First, look to our teacher training institutions. Encourage language majors to combine language and elementary education. After a history of providing special training for FLES teachers, Potsdam College now offers just such a dual major. No jobs? The state of Louisiana with a mandated elementary language program expects a shortage of over 100 FLES teachers in the coming academic year. New York State as of 1989 will require two units of language of every student before entering high school. Then, require in-service methods and adequate elementary classroom observation courses of those natives, secondary language teachers or non-professionals who hope to teach second languages to children. "Walk-ins" or "stand-ins" should no more be allowed to tamper with elementary school language programs than they are with programs in high school or college. The potential for permanent harm is far greater with the child learner.

The child's initial language experience will have a significant impact on the way he/she views the world, those who inhabit it and his or her role in it, not to mention the motivation for further language study. Children at the Potsdam

College Campus Learning Center, who are all students of French, wear name tags during Foreign Language Week which identify them as "Bilingual Americans and World Citizens". They are taught from the earliest age to think of themselves as Americans who must contribute to and be part of a much larger and more significant picture than the Northern New York countryside which surrounds them.

Make use of the media. Model teachers and model programs can reach many inexpensively when televised. Ask master teachers to visually record their work. Potsdam College has a video methods series, "Mon Atelier", which uses eighty children, age six through thirteen, in a non-scripted classroom setting supported by a running commentary. Investigate federal funds for teacher training. Currently NEH is evaluating a proposal from Potsdam College for a summer institute designed to train FLES teachers. Funded proposals are most often those which identify strong district needs and monies are available both for teacher training and improved language instruction.

Last, look to our Canadian neighbors whose numerous successful core and immersion experiences have led to important research, an abundance of excellent materials and exacting teacher certification requirements.

Until such time as the FLES teacher understands, speaks, writes, and reads a second language expertly; knows and understands the culture and country of that language well and has the on-paper, in the field credentials to prove it, he/she

forever a song and dance man will be.

THE CURRICULUM AND MATERIALS

American children have been routinely cheated--not only of the opportunity to learn a second language during what research says is their finest academic hour--but by the quality of the curriculum and materials purported to enhance that learning. By tradition we remove or never include in the children's language study a whole host of items which could make the learning of another language the child's richest academic experience. Very little is too complex for young language learners if presented in a manner and with vocabulary appropriate to their age and interest levels. Children, particularly today's children, are far more sophisticated than they are commonly believed to be. Commercial and instructional medias are aware of this--educational specialists should be as well. When the children learn by rote, must all they learn be in the présent or even in the passé composé? Is there an unwritten law that says a child cannot parrot a plusque parfait or a subjonctif? Must games be limited to the learning of vocabulary or could they set grammatical habits as well? A child can be aware of gender, understand the phenomenon of agreement, know that verbs change form and why and when elision takes place. Must the color red be taught only with apples or would Matisse's "Red Studio" do the job as well?

Caught by children's marvelous facility for mimicry, we often lock them in an oral vacuum, denying them access to the

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reading and writing that will continue to whet their language appetite. We limit their cultural background to the habits of every day living when in fact we should be attaching hooks on which a multitude of ideas, concepts and even philosophies can later be hung. However important the communicative skills, the students must come away with much, much more. In a small town with no major museum, they can still look at fine art; lacking access to food speciality shops, they can still sample gourmet delights. They can be aware of famous people and important events long before they sit in a history class. They can learn to look at that which and those who are different with a more open mind while they still have one. Young language students at Potsdam look at a Renoir and know it's not a VanGogh. They know the smell of French perfume, the taste and texture of a croissant. They know the name of the French President though the five year olds seem to agree unanimously that our own President is named George Washington. And if what is taught to the younger language learner is lacking in quality it is equally lacking in quantity. Syllabi when they exist, stop far, far short of a FLES student's capabilities. Children can not only count to ten, they can spell and compute the numbers to one hundred while using them to give cultural information. Children can not only learn over thirty parts of their own body, but they can apply them to expressions and situations that have nothing to do with physical description. When a child learns the verb to think, he/she can learn about great thinkers as well.

We need realistic expectations. The first question posed any teacher of FLES is, "Do the students in your program speak the language in question?" An honest answer is, "No". Can they at any given moment, truly and accurately express their thoughts and ideas? No. Do they form original statements? Yes. Can they ask and answer questions? Yes. Can they supply information given adequate stimuli? Yes. Can they recite, translate and express a limited range of emotions? Yes. Do they understand oral and some written communication? Yes. Do they know much about the land and people whose language they are studying? Yes. Do they have a better chance of becoming fluent having started young? Yes!

I suggest that FLES programs do not fail because there are not the funds to keep them afloat. Lacking money to hire resident language professionals, expertise can be borrowed. Potsdam College with the help of the National Endowment for the Humanities has created a media series, "Madame, Merci et Mou",[1] for just such a purpose. No, programs fail because of the prevailing notion that Americans cannot learn languages well and that if young Americans attempt to, they are not involved in a serious task.

As language professionals I suggest that we climb down from our ivory towers. Americans first and language teachers second, I suggest we take a hard look at the language learning site that has indeed the greatest potential for the citizenry of the next generation...the elementary school classroom. While continuing to

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support language learning at every level, I suggest we beware of putting the roof on a house not yet built. I suggest we teach what we believe a child can learn rather than what others have told us a child can learn. I suggest that the curriculum must grow with the child. I suggest that the learning of another's language is serious business, an academic, totally interdisciplinary, rigorous concern, be the learner two or twenty-two. I suggest that the best teacher whose superior command of language and facts is supported by an equally superior methodology belongs in the classroom of the youngest language learners. I suggest we cannot, must not fail again. I hope and pray good programs are not only in but here to stay.

NOTES

[1]"Madame, Merci et Mou": A Multi-media Foreigh Language Project for Children With a Humanistic Approach. Created with the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities Division of Educational Programs (Grant No: ES27120-77-344)

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